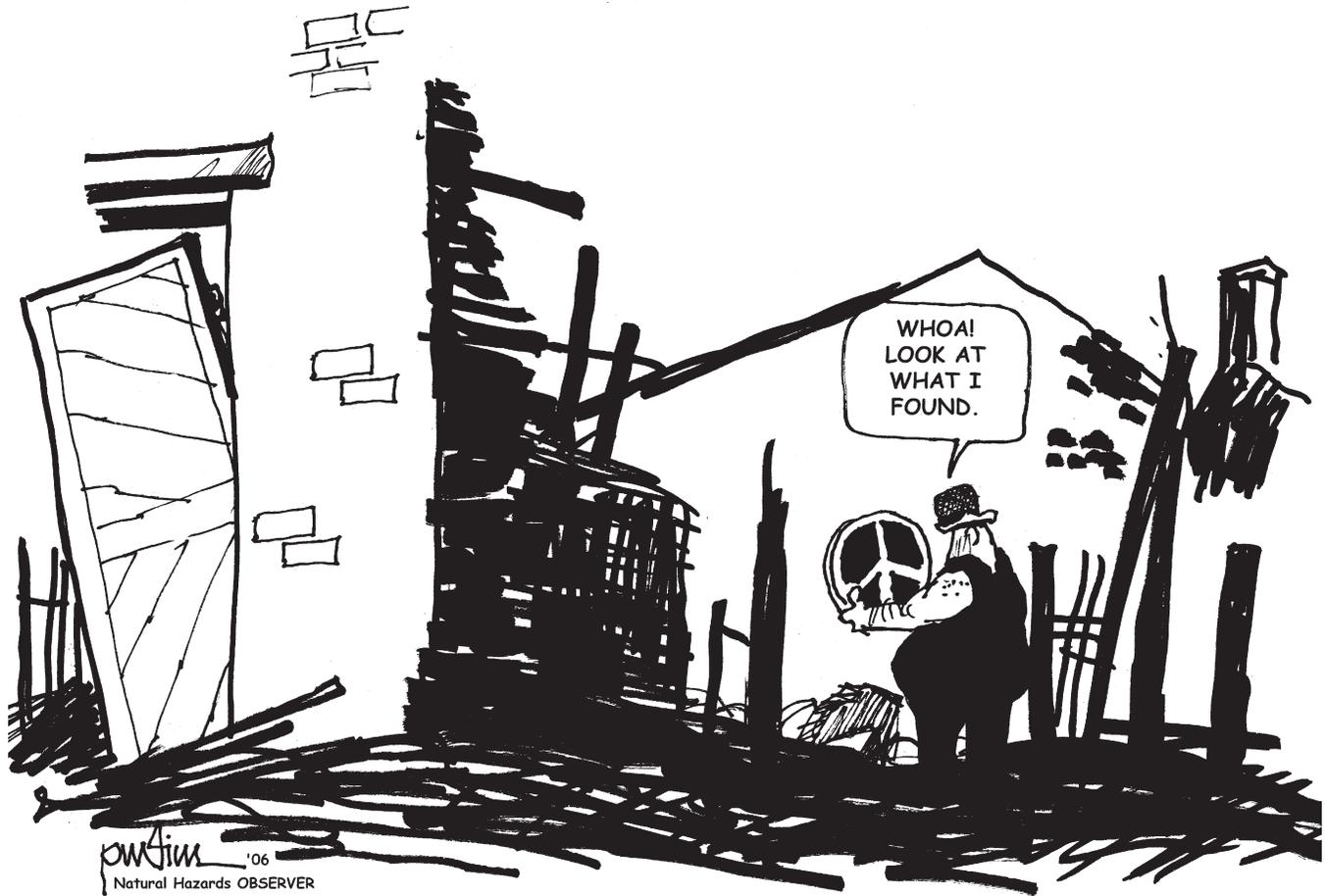


NATURAL HAZARDS Observer

Volume XXX Number 6

July 2006



Fostering Peace in Postdisaster Regions

— an invited comment

Around the world, conflict zones are marked by devastation. Physical and emotional suffering is compounded in areas where disasters overlay existing violence. However, there sometimes exist unique circumstances in which disasters can bolster peacemaking opportunities. In this article, we examine how ongoing conflicts in Aceh and Sri Lanka changed following the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, and how the October 2005 Kashmir earthquake affected the rocky relationship between Pakistan and India.

When Disaster and Conflict Intersect

A combination of human-related factors—including ecosystem destruction, climate change, population growth, and the growth of often poorly constructed human settlements in vulnerable and inappropriate areas—has set the stage for more frequent and devastating “unnatural” disasters: natural disturbances made worse by human activities. Human populations are straining against the environmental

safety net that has, until recently, offered them a measure of protection from the effects of natural disasters.

Disasters can undermine livelihoods, compromise the long-term habitability or economic viability of an affected area, and diminish human security in other ways. The outcome is determined not only by the severity of the disaster, but also by the timeliness and adequacy of relief and rebuilding programs and by the degree of resilience in affected communities.

Economic and ecological marginalization worsen the impacts of disasters on poor people and ethnic minorities. A disproportionate number of the world's poor live on the frontline of exposure to disasters: underdeveloped countries account for 53 percent of recorded disaster-related deaths even though they are home to only 11 percent of the people exposed to natural hazards worldwide.

In urban areas, poor people contend with precarious housing options, including slums. In rural areas, inequitable land distribution means that small farmers are often forced onto steep hillsides, where they are much more vulnerable to massive erosion and landslides. Since the coping capacity of poor people tends to be very limited, a disaster may push them over the edge economically.

When conflict areas are hit by disasters, as has been recently demonstrated, there is the potential for vastly different outcomes. Here we focus on three case studies: Aceh province in Indonesia, Pakistan/India, and Sri Lanka. Each area has experienced a catastrophic natural disaster within the past two years. Each is the site of existing violent conflict. And each has taken a distinctly unique path toward either peace or increased conflict since disaster struck.

Aceh: Peace at Last

When the catastrophic December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami hit Indonesia, it killed almost 170,000 people in the province of Aceh—more than ten times the number that perished there in three decades of civil war—and triggered a fundamental change in attitudes, leading to successful peace negotiations between the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM).

Implementation of the first phase of the August 2005 “memorandum of understanding” has been very successful. By December 2005, GAM fighters turned in their weapons, and the government withdrew nonterritorial military and police from Aceh. But, big challenges still lie ahead. Some provisions of the peace agreement remain controversial, such as how political parties and candidates may contest upcoming elections, and whether a new Human Rights Court will be able to try past human rights abuses.

Post-tsunami reconstruction has been agonizingly slow, marred by land and property disputes and corruption. Only about 16,000 houses, of a total 120,000 needed, were built by early 2006, leaving many survivors in tents and barracks. In March, 10,000 of the new houses were found to be so poorly built that they may need major repair.

Swift reconstruction and economic revival are essential to cementing peace in a province where 40 percent of the population lives in poverty and several thousand former GAM fighters need to find new livelihoods. Meanwhile,

another threat to the tenuous peace is the focus placed almost exclusively on tsunami survivors at the expense of those displaced by the long conflict.

Aceh still faces significant challenges, but the desire for peace is strong. Although the end of conflict is not irreversible, the province stands a good chance of retaining its recent calm.

Kashmir: The Necessity of Political Courage

The massive tremor that struck northern Pakistan and Kashmir on October 8, 2005, cut through a fault line of conflict that has divided Pakistan and India for 58 years. With the death toll unofficially pegged at close to 90,000, the disaster inflicted greater suffering in a matter of minutes than that wrought by the last 16 years of conflict.

The postdisaster situation offered a unique opportunity to build trust and defuse the Kashmir conflict, and indeed, both governments made some promising overtures. Within two weeks of the disaster, India had delivered close to 300 tons of food, medicine, and tents to Pakistan, consented to let Pakistani helicopters operate in a no-fly zone along the border, and reestablished cross-border phone links severed nearly 16 years earlier.

The two governments also agreed to open five crossing points along the Kashmir “Line of Control” to facilitate cross-border relief and allow separated families to meet, but it took weeks before the first individuals were allowed passage. An Indian offer to have its army helicopters join search-and-rescue missions foundered because Pakistan refused to allow Indian pilots to fly the aircraft and India insisted on using its own crews.

India and Pakistan continue to gingerly move toward more normalized relations. They agreed to add a second cross-Kashmir bus service for families that live on both sides of the cease-fire line, augmenting the existing “peace bus” service that was launched with much fanfare in April 2005. (Elaborate security checks and stultifying bureaucracy have severely limited the number of people traveling.) Such moves indicate there is hope for Pakistan and India, but distrust and lack of visionary political leadership have turned a situation with the potential for a historic breakthrough into a timid and tightly circumscribed exercise.

Sri Lanka: Backsliding into Violence

Before the tsunami hit Sri Lanka, this island nation was tormented by a 20-year civil war that finally stalled with a fragile cease-fire in February 2002. The main conflict implicates the country's Sinhala majority and the Tamil minority, most notoriously the LTTE—the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Both communities also suffer from deep and violent internal divides.

Despite initial enthusiasm, resumption of war had become a dreaded expectation by the time the tsunami struck due to questionable political leadership on both sides and the exclusion of several key constituencies from the peace process. The days immediately following the tsunami were marked by a groundswell of solidarity, spontaneous acts of empathy, and calls for reconciliation. Soldiers from both sides worked together to provide relief. But basic rifts re-

emerged before long. Government officials and rebels competed for aid distribution and repair work.

Hoping to reinvigorate the deadlocked peace process, international donors urged that a “joint mechanism” be established for the equitable distribution of relief and reconstruction aid. After drawn-out negotiations, the government and LTTE finally signed an agreement in June 2005, but the governing coalition broke apart over the deal. Presidential elections in November 2005 brought to power Mahinda Rajapakse, who vowed to scrap the aid-sharing deal.

Tensions between the government and the LTTE rose sharply. A shadow war in the eastern part of the country gathered momentum, with political killings on the rise. Though the situation was temporarily calmed, April and May saw an upward spiral in violence that triggered widespread fears of a return to full-scale conflict. Far from helping to overcome conflict, the response to the tsunami in Sri Lanka, which originally recognized the opportunity to strengthen relations, raised the stakes and sharpened the divides in a precarious conflict.

Lessons Learned

Goodwill and confidence-building in the aftermath of disasters can be a powerful catalyst for transforming conflict dynamics, but these sentiments do not automatically

lead to peace. Humanitarianism needs to be translated into tangible political change. That means:

- Addressing grievances and root causes of conflict,
- Giving a strong voice to civil society, and
- Pressing forward with demilitarization.

The international aid and development communities must confront the vested interests of those who benefit from a continuation of conflict and thus might derail a peace process. Many militaries, for instance, fear that conflict resolution may lead to budget cuts and diminish their influence over society. Rebels and militant groups hold less sway in peacetime, while arms industries and dealers experience slower sales. These perspectives must be addressed as civil society, governments, and peace negotiators work toward positive outcomes in postdisaster conflict situations.

Michael Renner (mrenner@worldwatch.org)
Zoë Chafe (zchafe@worldwatch.org)
Worldwatch Institute

Worldwatch Institute is an interdisciplinary research organization based in Washington, DC. For more information about Worldwatch’s research on natural disasters and peace-making, see www.worldwatch.org/features/disasters/.

New Biography Chronicles Life of Gilbert F. White

To many in the hazards and disasters community, a biography of the eminent, public-minded geographer Gilbert F. White was a long time in coming. But, from one accomplishment to the next, White never seemed to slow, adding story after story to a life chock-full of memorable achievements. In *Living with Nature’s Extremes: The Life of Gilbert Fowler White* (2006. 336 pp. \$26.50), author Robert E. Hinshaw tracks White’s fascinating life and his legacy to both science and humanity.

Known as the “father of floodplain management” and the founder of the Natural Hazards Center, White spent his career studying nature’s extremes: the hazards they posed for humanity and the political, scientific, and philosophical issues surrounding their mitigation and effective societal response. White proposed that man work with nature, not against it, championing sound, comprehensive management of floodplains. He advocated adaptation to or accommodation of flood hazards, where feasible, rather than the structural solutions that dominated policy in the early twentieth century. He also made major contributions to the study of water systems in developing countries, the management and preservation of arid lands, global environmental change, international cooperation over water resources, and mitigation of a number of natural hazards.

Initially, White was not eager to see his life in print, but ultimately he recognized that through his experience, knowledge, and insight, current and future generations could continue to learn from his example and carry on his work. Thus, this book is recommended to anyone who shares his interests, his concerns, and his passions.

Published by Johnson Books, White’s biography can be purchased from local and online booksellers or *Big Earth Publishing*, 3005 Center Green Drive, Suite 220, Boulder, CO 80301; (303) 443-9766, (800) 258-5830; e-mail: books@bigearthpublishing.com; www.bigearthpublishing.com/. A limited number of copies are available for a discount (\$20.00 plus \$5.00 for shipping and handling) from the Natural Hazards Center. To order from the Center, visit <http://ibs.colorado.edu/hazards/catalog/gfw/index.php> or contact Diane Smith at (303) 492-6818 or diane.smith@colorado.edu.

